New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1952

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**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of October 20, 1952*

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Millionairess"

Herald Tribune (New York)
October 18, 1952

'The Millionairess'

By WALTER F. KERR

IN "The Millionairess," which opened at the Shubert last night, Katharine Hepburn is beautiful, radiant, vital and not very good. As practically every one knows by now, Miss Hepburn has snatched up a bit of latter-day and second-rate Shaw, given it a shot of adrenalin out of her own incredible energies, and succeeded in standing London on its ears with the high-gale gusto of her uninhibited goings-on. The Theater Guild has now brought it to Broadway for a limited engagement, and the advance excitement has been so great that the local run is almost assured of financial success.

Of one thing there can be no doubt. This always appealing and commendably ambitious personality means to give the theater the best and the brightest that is in her. She drives "The Millionairess" before her with devastating dedication, roaring out the Shaw prose with animal ferocity and whipping her fellow players into a spectacular frenzy. She doesn't walk about the stage, she marches. She never sits on a chair, she teeters on the edge of it as though she were about to whirl off into space. She doesn't speak to the other characters, she clutches them in a vise-like grip and all but clambers down their throats. When she throws back her head to laugh, she arches her back in an unbelievable half-circle, and when she gets off a sofa she simply throws her two feet into the air and lands on them. She takes the stairs three at a time, stretches out on the floor and wriggles around on it, and—just for a nightcap—throws a good-sized man to the mat twice in rapid succession and then hurls him down a stairwell.

But behind the pyrotechnics there is very little plan. Each moment seems improvised as it comes along, as though the actress had asked herself, "What can I do now?" Here she juts out her lower jaw and growls a speech in a single intonation. There she lets her jaw go slack and bleats an entire passage. Here a non-stop reading, there a charmingly broken one. At times she sounds like an alarm clock that no one can shut off—until she does, with a calculated jolt. The tricks are fascinating, but they are all tricks. Miss Hepburn's whole performance originates in the larynx; there is nothing deeper, more meaningful to tie the fireworks together and the razzle-dazzle becomes disconcertingly hollow before the evening is far advanced.

No one has pretended that the play is much. Shaw is expressing both his contempt and his admiration for the money-made aristocrat who thrives by paralyzing the wills of others. He gives this she-devil her due in a couple of resounding speeches, but the fable he has invented for her—even allowing for the normal Shaw impudence and irony—is a pretty muddled and outdated business. Even so, there are characteristic flashes: an unruffled lawyer tending to his business even when that business consists in facilitating the suicide of a client; the millionairess pointing out how careful the wealthy must be if they are to avoid being bled to death by charity.

The supporting company is a model of elegance. Cyril Ritchard is splendid in a part which he could play with one hand tied behind his back and which he does in fact play with one foot in a cast. Robert Helpmann has several of the play's more arresting moments: he gets delightful humor into one of Shaw's perennial jests about medical men, and he is amiably droll while he is turning the tables on the aggressive man-eater. Genine Graham provides a pleasant oasis of calm in the surrounding din, and Peter Dyneley brings great enthusiasm to his explanation of how financial dynasties are created.

Perhaps London had led us to expect too much of "The Millionairess." To the parched and impoverished realism of our contemporary acting styles Miss Hepburn promised to bring a refreshing rain. But the performance at the Shubert last night seemed a good bit more like a deluge.

"THE MILLIONAIRESS"

Comedy by Bernard Shaw; staged by Michael Benthall; settings by James Bailey; presented by the Theatre Guild in association with H. M. Tennent, Ltd., at the Shubert Theatre, October 17, 1952. The cast:

Julius Sagamore.. Campbell Cotts
The Lady....Katharine Hepburn
Alastair Fitzfassenden.....
Peter Dyneley
Patricia Smith...Genine Graham
Adrian Blenderbland.....
Cyril Ritchard
The Doctor...Robert Helpmann
The Man..Bertram Shuttleworth
The Woman....Nora Nicholson
The Manager..Vernon Greeves

New York Post
October 19, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Victory of Katharine Hepburn

As she was doing in London when I saw her there last summer, Katharine Hepburn pounced with gay and gallant ferocity on one of Bernard Shaw's least rewarding plays at the Shubert Theater Friday night, and, by the sheer gusto and excitement of her vibrant personality and beauty, breathed vitality and dramatic interest into it. Although "The Millionairess" is basically not only a tedious but rather distasteful comedy, Miss Hepburn makes it a vivid, lively and exuberant show, and, so far as I am concerned, scores every bit as resounding a victory here as she did among the somewhat startled English critics and public.

Essentially, what she registers is a triumph of personality rather than of acting, but that should not conceal the fact that she is also giving a remarkably mettlesome and talented performance. Knowing that the play tends to creak considerably at the joints and that a virtuoso portrayal of an unusual order is required, Miss Hepburn plunges at her characterization with all the force of her dynamic being, but she also acts with guile and resource, and she succeeds in doing what Shaw himself had failed to achieve: she makes the unpleasant heroine of his fable not only believable but attractive.

It is not an easy achievement. Although "The Millionairess" is written with its author's customary grace and intelligence, it is also pretty wobbly and uncertain in its manipulations, and there is more than a moment of dullness in it. What is worse, it brings out two of Shaw's most unpleasant qualities: his love of money and his virtual reverence for power. The result is that there is an oddly mean-spirited atmosphere to it as it goes about glorifying those disagreeable traits of its great playwright, and, unless it is played with disarming innocence of spirit, it can be fairly annoying.

In the few minutes when Miss Hepburn is not on the stage, it is possible for one to be only too well aware of these weaknesses. But when she is present, which is fortunately most of the time, she doesn't give you much opportunity to bother about the defects. She sweeps her audience along by sheer force of her dynamic being, and, to get right down to it, by her remarkable sexual magnetism, and, if both she and you occasionally become a trifle winded in the process, it is a small price to pay. It is one of her greatest successes that she makes the ruthless young woman she is playing almost a sympathetic creation.

I think it is quite likely that she and Bernard Shaw are the only people ever concerned with "The Millionairess" who have thought it was a good play and that its heroine was anything but an overpowering bully. Sympathizing with both the comedy and its title character, Miss Hepburn has not only the vivid forcefulness but the magnetic acting skill necessary to make it all interesting and alive. Certainly, I wouldn't for a moment recommend the play as a good example of the work of one of the most important of playwrights. But, as an exciting one-woman show, played with humor and a curious kind of beauty, it is a fascinating tour-de-force.

Although you may not always remember it, there are other people in the cast. Most of them, including the skillful Cyril Ritchard, are rather lost in the star's tremendous exuberance, but Robert Helpmann, as the Mohammedan doctor who almost tames the lady, and Campbell Cotts, as the lawyer who admires her, manage to make themselves noticed in the general excitement. Indeed, Michael Benthall has staged the Shavian uproar with taste and style. But, in the end, it is all Miss Hepburn. She is a remarkable and strangely beautiful young woman, but I don't think we should lose sight of the fact that she is also an actress of distinction.

Daily Mirror

October 18, 1952

Star's Vitality Enriches 'The Millionairess'

By ROBERT COLEMAN

The Theatre Guild brought Katharine Hepburn to the Shubert Theatre last evening in G. B. Shaw's "The Millionairess." This combination packed them in for many months in London, and there have been lengthy lines at the box-office over here for the past two weeks. Nothing quite like them have been seen along Broadway in a lot of moons.

Katharine Hepburn has become a magical name in the theatre. She has a terrific drawing power. In our opinion, she's not a great actress nor a great beauty. But she has enormous, electrifying vitality, and a genuine affection for the stage. These assets make her irresistible.

Currently, Miss Hepburn is impersonating a tempestuous, ruthless, shrewd, rich girl, quite the richest in England. She marries an amateur athlete because of her admiration for his knock-out punch, but the match is doomed to failure. Next, she turns her attentions toward a well-bred sybarite, but finds him too easy to handle. In the end, with a divorce in the offing, she finds at least temporary happiness with an idealistic Egyptian doctor who gets as much pleasure spending money as she does making it.

Miss Hepburn is a human dynamo as the headstrong girl with the Midas touch. We haven't seen such an energetic, exciting performance since the Lunts swept like a hurricane through Shakespeare's "The Taming of the Shrew." It is good to know that we still have a few robust actresses left. There's been entirely too much anemic pretending hereabouts over the past few semesters.

Cyril Ritchard is wonderfully droll as the ineffectual man-about-town, while Robert Helpmann is quite moving as the gentle, humane doctor. Campbell Cotts is excellent as a rotund, pompous, put-upon and likable solicitor. Salutes also are due Peter Dyneley, Genine Graham, Bertram Shuttleworth, Nora Nicholson and Vernon Greeves.

Michael Benthall, who directed Miss Hepburn in the Theatre Guild's "As You Like It," has paced the comedy skilfully, and James Bailey has contributed eminently right settings.

"The Millionairess" was written late in Shaw's distinguished career. It is not out of his top drawer. It had had but one brief production in England before Miss Hepburn gave it a vote of confidence. It is hardly a play at all. Rather is it a series of witty, probing, tongue-in-cheek comments on money, capitalism, poverty, politics, labor and people. They are delivered by a set of fascinating characters.

Those who like the slick, well-made play may not find the comedy to their taste. And we are willing to grant that it's third-rate Shaw. But even lesser Shaw towers head and shoulders over the best his competitors have to offer. We enjoyed "The Millionairess" immensely. We thought it a stimulating, provocative, exhilarating romp. The great Irishman had genius even in his off moments. Where will you find his match today?

Journal American

October 18, 1952

Hepburn Brings Force But No Tour

By JOHN McCLAIN

REGISTER herewith one dissenting vote on the merits of G. B. Shaw's "The Millionairess," which opened at the Shubert Theatre last night with Katharine Hepburn in the lead. It is generally acknowledged that this is one of the great Irisher's weakest plays, but the scuttlebutt was that Miss Hepburn had somehow transformed it into a *tour de force*. I disagree.

I think that if the drama had been written by Ladislaus Schmeer, an unknown playwright, and if the star had been Bernardine Crudd, a talented young lady resembling Katharine Hepburn, it would never have survived the first week in Boston.

It would have been established by that time that Mr. Schmeer's story added up to a wad of used bubble gum and that Miss Crudd was unable, despite her rantings and acrobatics, to hold the clients in the seats.

Forget that Shaw had anything to do with the show, forget all the great lines he has written in other plays, and read into the "Millionairess" only what comes out of the mouths of the players and you come away with a sense of confusion and emptiness.

It Could Be

It has been reported elsewhere that this is a great social document, an encyclical disposing for all time of the subject of inherited wealth. If that is true I can only report that it didn't penetrate as far as row three last night.

What did reach row three was a carelessly constructed, rarely hilarious exposition of an episode in the life of an entirely implausible young lady of infinite means.

She is unhappily married and wants to commit suicide. Her solicitor talks her out of this, and we next find her in a dreary assignation with a fortune hunter.

When he makes a disparaging remark about her father, the founder of her fortune, she throws him downstairs and, for no logical reason, throws herself into the lap of an Arabian doctor, who happens to come along at the right moment.

There are certain strings attached to this romance. She will give the doc 150 pounds, but at the end of six months he must have built it into 50,000 pounds. On the other hand, he will give her something like $3 which she must pyramid into a corresponding bundle. That is their bargain.

In the end it develops that she has fulfilled her part of the agreement with infinite ease ("those that have, gets"), while he has given away the money she gave him to help a widow out of a tough fix. So she and the medic exit happily, as the curtain falls.

It would be interesting to imagine what would happen today if a writer presented this plot to a producer, adding that he thought it would be an excellent vehicle for Katharine Hepburn. Chances are he would get chased from Shubert Alley to the Laughing Academy.

Enters Screaming

For her part in the proceedings Miss Hepburn has either chosen, or been instructed to give the most strident performance since Betty Hutton's last appearance at the Palace. She enters screaming, and within a few minutes has demolished a break-away chair; she exhibits a rare knowledge of judo to the discomfiture of her leading man and does a swan dive onto her face with no visible ill effects a short time later.

Finally, just before the last curtain, she holds still long enough to deliver an endless Shavian observation about how all husbands are many men, and wives are all kinds of women, and no bachelor will ever understand the problem, but by then it didn't seem to be particularly pertinent, anyway.

Cyril Ritchard, as the unhappy assignee who is booted downstairs, delivers a skilful and thankless performance. He is required to sit speechless for interminable periods, and what he is permitted to say is not memorable.

Robert Helpmann, the Arab doctor, toils courageously but never quite succeeds in bringing credence to the artificial situation into which he has been projected. This is not his fault, either.

The one character written with any fidelity, the lawyer, is played superbly by Campbell Cotts. But it would take the entire Supreme Court to bring logic out of the chaos of "The Millionairess."

In Miss Hepburn's *tour de force* I get the *force*, but I don't dig the *tour*.

DAILY NEWS

October 18, 1952

Miss Hepburn's 'The Millionairess' An Astonishing Solo Performance

By JOHN CHAPMAN

For months on end the cabled news dispatches from London told us what a hellcat and termagant Katharine Hepburn was over there in the production of G. B. Shaw's minor work, "The Millionairess." Shaw and Hepburn, we were informed, were as lively a combination as nitrogen and glycerin. Just wait, we were advised.

So we waited until last evening, when Hepburn, "The Millionairess" and Shaw swept into the Shubert Theatre — and, by gracious, the Londoners were right for once. Miss Hepburn is indeed a hellcat and a termagant; furthermore, she is a first-class acrobat, not bad as a weight-lifter, shows promise as comedienne too. It's a dandy performance of a play whose libretto is not much better than "Buttrio Square."

Old Shaw, Souped Up.

This play is late Shaw, dating from around 1935, and is not nearly as keen as the old boy's turn-of-the-century stuff, like "Man and Superman." In it Shaw says that knowledge is no use without money, which is sensible enough, perhaps—but he doesn't try to prove it in his play. All he does (it's an odd thing about Shaw: no matter how dead he may be, he still rates being written about in the present tense) is to argue for a while that people who are rich have an instinct for making money. Miss Hepburn, the richest woman in the world, takes a dare and becomes in turn a sweatshop worker and a scullery maid. In no time at all she directs a business and then owns a hotel. The arrogance of wealth is all a pauper needs to stop being a pauper.

Good Company, Too.

"The Millionairess' is Hepburn's show. She begins it and ends it on a note of frenzy. She stomps, shouts and strides—and yet is quite winningly and cannily funny. She wears some beautiful clothes and treats them as though they were rags. She surely is giving the performance of her career, and I admire it for its spirit and guts.

The Theatre Guild and H. M. Tennent Ltd. (the latter the London originators of the production) have mounted "The Millionairess" nicely in some fine settings by James Bailey and have provided Miss Hepburn with some talented playmates, including one of my favorite comedians, Cyril Ritchard, and the resourceful Robert Helpmann. But, as so many London observers have already said, it is Miss Hepburn's show. Shaw is incidental.

"The Millionairess" will have a limited run at the Shubert, according to the announcements, because of the physical and vocal strain it imposes on the leading lady. This I can believe. But I hope that Miss Hepburn will continue her interest in Shaw. I'd be fascinated to see what she might do with "Candida." I should also like to see her wrestle Tallulah Bankhead, two falls out of three, and would bet on Hepburn.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 18, 1952

Hepburn Opens in 'Millionairess'

Two Schools of Thought on Her Acting

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Everybody at the Shubert Theater last night expected Katharine Hepburn's appearance in Shaw's "The Millionairess" to hit like a blockbuster.

It fizzed and grumbled, but it never detonated. In the end, you felt as if you had ducked all night—even crouched to the floor—only to discover she was aiming somewhere else.

It could be that the star's throat prevented the final explosion. From the sound of her voice, it must have looked like tartar steak.

Lacks Imagination.

But this was lower drawer Shaw. And it is not helped by a heavy-handed attempt to blow up a deflated script with noise and energy, where imagination and artfulness might have given it diverting color.

It is easy to understand Miss Hepburn's conquest of London with this performance. The town had never seen her before in person, and it was shrewd to exaggerate all her strident vitality. What we think of embarassedly as her faults, apparently shocked the British right out of their chairs.

There will be two schools of thought about Hepburn's performance here. She plays a bad mannered rich girl who literally throws her husbands around, and proves she can turn a few shillings into a fortune, the way she insists her men must do.

The Squirrel Cage Itself.

Adorers are going to find the star dazzling, and fabulously energetic. They will rightly wallow in descriptions of her clothes, and marvel at her unique vocal tricks. They will admire the fact that instead of being in a squirrel cage, she *is* the cage itself.

The other school will find her attack on the play distracting without enhancing its spasmodic entertainment value. They will find her mugging, bombast, and hopping up and down as if she wanted to leave the room, quite amateurish. They may call her coyness elephantine, and point out that her biggest laughs come from yelling interminable sentences on the same note in an abnormally long breath. They will say she is imitating a gauche arrogant vulgar woman, without making any real comical comment on the character.

Rarely Very Funny.

Miss Hepburn plays her rich girl rather like a Tallulah who never had a drink and never told a joke. All the vitality is there, as she rolls on the floor, races down stairs, falls over furniture and generally musses up herself and the stage.

Like a rebel tomboy playing pirate, she uses a howling farce style on a contrived intellectual comedy. This is rarely very funny, and only startling for the first few minutes.

Hepburn even caricatures herself, saying "foo-wul" for fool, and "stayuz" for stairs, then posing with her back out of joint like a female impersonator. The girl is an extremist, and a real brave. She has been unkindly misled.

Blackmail in Sweatshop.

Cyril Ritchard gives the most genuinely amusing performance of the evening as a gent who escapes this arrogant witch at the price of several broken bones. Robert Helpmann plays an Egyptian doctor who indulges in endless philosophizing.

In the middle of the play there is a tedious scene in which the Millionairess blackmails the entire staff of a sweatshop. Oddly enough it is here more than anywhere else that the star succeeds in projecting a genuine elated version of the character she has blown up.

The fault of the production lies in the simple truth that because the central figure is charmless in real life, that is no excuse for making her charmless in the theater. With a little wit in the direction and enactment, she could be shredded mercilessly for the entertainment, instead of the bludgeoning, of the audience.

The New York Times

October 18, 1952

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Since Bernard Shaw's "The Millionairess" is a senile play, the plan seems to be for Katharine Hepburn to supply the youth and the vitality. England is now slowly recovering from the shock of this boisterous performance. Last evening Miss Hepburn transferred it to the Shubert Theatre to open the Theatre Guild's new season.

Although Shaw gives the part a lyrical and voluminous name, which unfortunately is not printed in the program, most of us will probably think of it as Katherina of "The Taming of the Shrew." Like Shakespeare's Kate, our own Kate enters in foul temper at the top of her voice and smashes through the play, breaking up some of the furniture.

Miss Hepburn has a lot of physical energy and vocal power, and doubtless more endurance than any actress alive. Taking everything at top speed, she clears all the hurdles and knocks down anything that gets in her way. No doubt this is one way of concealing the infirmities of an untidy and maundering script. But it makes for a certain monotony of its own. Although Shaw took a very dim view of Shakespeare, Shakespeare wore his Kate down before "The Shrew" was over. From the practical point of view, there is something to be said for calming down the termagants before the final curtain. Too much energy and caterwauling can be stupefying for a full evening.

Like many of Shaw's last plays, "The Millionairess" is the anti-climax to an ingenious preface. Unfortunately, it is the play that gets on the stage. It is the story of a rich woman so overpowering that she wrecks whatever she cannot turn into gold. The plot is probably intended to prove that the rich have to get richer or that they have to be smart enough to conquer any human impulses that creep up on them. Although Shaw preserves his moral standing by assuming a heavily ironical manner, you suspect that he rather admires this female monster who either swallows or destroys everybody she encounters.

* * *

There is some bean-bag badinage here and there in the play. There is also an Egyptian doctor of high-minded principles who by way of contrast provides us with some of the moral wisdom of Mohammed. But it is to be feared that "The Millionairess" is a tiresome play, the product of Shaw's restlessness in his latter years when he could not stop scribbling. And it is to be feared also that his millionairess is a tiresome person.

Despite her energy and good sportsmanship, Miss Hepburn does little to destroy this irreverent impression. Dressed in the most stunning costumes of the season (Pierre Balmain, Paris), she hammers away on one note from entrance to conclusion. With the exception of a lyrical passage about the torments of marriage, she takes every line in about the same key and tempo. What wit there may be lurking in the lines gets short shrift in this treatment. Miss Hepburn and Michael Benthall, the director, may be right in deciding that "The Millionairess" is hopeless unless it is played like a noisy, turbulent farce. But the shock treatment does not make the patient genuinely attractive.

* * *

Cyril Ritchard is happily on hand to play one of his bumbling Britishers — wavering pleasantly between the coy and the resentful. As the Egyptian medicine man, Robert Halpmann gives an agreeably humorous performance that shows how much finer foreigners are than Englishmen according to Shaw's familiar formula. As an innocent homebody who is living in sin with a married man, Genine Graham plays a minor part with charming humor. The other actors are hard to understand, since they have acquired the fashionable habit of fastidiously swallowing their words.

Miss Hepburn can be understood clearly. Perhaps that's the trouble. As a piece of theatre literature, "The Millionairess" is not worth all the energy she is squandering on it.

"Bernardine"

Daily Mirror

October 17, 1952

'Bernardine' Is Moving Story of Adolescence

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Before his death several months ago, Irving L. Jacobs had arranged to produce "Bernardine," comedy by a fellow Denverite, Mary Chase. After Jacobs' demise, Guthrie McClintic took over. The production arrived at the Playhouse last evening, and was well received.

The comedy has to do primarily with adolescents who shock their elders by their seemingly hard-bolled attitudes toward life, their sloppy dress, their concern with members of the opposite sex, sometimes to the detriment of scholarship. The Bernardine of the title is the teenagers' dream of the kind of girl they think they want, free and easy and, if possible, with a 1952 Cadillac convertible.

The kids hang around pseudo hot-spots swigging weak beer when what they really want is Pepsi-Cola. In public they buy be-bop records, but some of them sneak Tchaikowsky and Chopin discs home under their coats. They pretend to be lazy, when often they earn the money to buy their clothes and pay tuition fees. They boast of their conquests, which usually are imaginary. Beneath their would-be sophisticated exteriors they are mostly just nice, decent youngsters.

"Bernardine," regrettably, has its faults. The first act is too sketchily drawn, and too stuffily staged by McClintic. The characters, both kids and grown-ups, often seem caricatures rather than real people. But both Miss Chase and McClintic let go with heart and skill in the second stanza, which more than atones for the lapses of its predecessor.

Johnny Stewart is delightful as Miss Chase's most complex and, perhaps, most typical representative of adolescence. She has brought more depth and feeling to Buford Weldy than to his companion "Big Wheels" who frequent the Shamrock cafe. And Stewart etches him onstage with warming emotional effect.

John Kerr is excellent as Arthur Beaumont, most "sophisticated" and looked-up-to member of his gang. Alney Alba, as Buford's doting mother, is handicapped in the beginning by stiff direction, but later makes you want to cheer for her playing of a scene in which she comes to an understanding of her son's viewpoint.

Beverly Lawrence brings sympathy and tenderness to a glamorous divorcee who helps Buford find himself. Camilla de Witt is quite charming as the exasperating though genuine love of Buford's life. Salutes also are due Girard Gillen, Andy Sanders, Billy James, Warren Berlinger, Jane Van Duser, Fred Baker, Frank Valenza, Peggy Cass, Michael Wager, and Bobby Vail.

After a slow and disappointing start, "Bernardine" becomes an amusing and moving theatrical experience. The best, the most rewarding comedy of the season. A very young lady near us at the Playhouse sagely observed at curtain's fall: "I guess only parents and kids can appreciate this." Well, darling, there are millions of them in America. But lots of us who are neither can enjoy it, too.

Note to Mary Chase and Guthrie McClintic: "Please, oh, please, relax that first act. Let your gifted players have their heads. Make that initial canto worthy of the second. "Bernardine" is much too endearing to have even minor flaws.

"BERNARDINE"

Comedy by Mary Chase; staged by Guthrie McClintic; settings by John Robert Lloyd; costumes by Noel Taylor; presented by Irving L. Jacobs at the Playhouse Theatre, October 16, 1952. The cast:

Arthur Beaumont....John Kerr
Leonard Carney...Girard Gillen
Will McElroy.....Andy Sanders
Morgan Olson.....Billy James
Dave Gibbs..Warren Berlinger
Ruth Weldy.....Alney Alba
Selma Cantrick..Jane Van Duser
Jean Cantrick..Camilla De Witt
Buford Weldy...Johnny Stewart
Marvin Griner.....Fred Baker
George Friedelhauser.....
Frank Valenza
Helen.....Peggy Cass
Vernon Kinswood.....
Michael Wager
Enid Lacey..Beverly Lawrence
Last Straw..Harmon Van Doren
Bellboy.....Richard Camp
A. J. Witnick.....Bobby Vail
A Woman....Katherine Barrett
Ogden Kratke.....Paul Genge

New York World-Telegram and The [illegible] Sun

October 17, 1952

Mary Chase Writes A Very Merry Chase

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Mary Chase has turned her golden ear in the direction of adolescence and come up with a fascinatingly touching and funny play in "Bernardine."

She is writing about a half lit world of confusing urges, incipient passions and dreams of lush excesses. Her chief characters carry draft cards that are not yet smudged or dog eared. They are the most sophisticated cynical crowd imaginable, but their worldliness is thin and vulnerable as a cobweb.

These lads attempt forays with the prissy flirts of their crowd, and dream aloud in language all their own of the mystical Venus who lives only to lavish her charms on them. This generous charmer is a legend they have named Bernardine.

The play relates the story of Wormy, a kind of a blight, but a big wheel, who makes it all the way up to the apartment of a delicious blonde who understands his pangs better than he realizes.

His enactment of Lothario is called off by invitation when the light of his experimenting eye realizes she is an old friend of his mother. And Wormy returns to the anxious affections of the girl next door.

None of this is written or directed for big laughs, but its humor is penetrating and constant. The love story, which is no fantasy, with a girl who does not exist, is immeasurably tender and quite devastating in its subtle pathos.

Like nobody else writing today, Mrs. Chase can step back and observe a generation, either young or old, from the authentic viewpoint of the other. Here she is writing in the grand tradition of Mark Twain and Booth Tarkington.

Johnny Stewart plays Wormy with fine irascible gloom and an appreciation for the doom involved in being a chicken instead of a wolf.

John Kerr is excellent without a flaw as the king of the gang, the smooth operator with the best ideas, the grandest scorn and the flourishing imagination which dreams up "Sneaky Falls," where mothers have to ask their sons for permission to go out at night.

Michael Wager is entirely realistic as the rebel who actually studies, and hopes to make time with the dames later in life.

Alney Alba achieves a delicate manner for Wormy's chattering mother, who understands her own extreme concern, but cannot change it, in her anxiety for him to have rainbows to walk over.

Beverly Lawrence has exactly the right appearance and generous manner for the closest counterpart of Bernardine that Wormy is ever likely to meet.

DAILY NEWS

October 17, 1952

'Bernardine' a Funny and Tender Play About the Agonies of Youth

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Anybody who knows Mary Chase finds her just as nice and sensible a party as you'd ever meet—but inside her handsome head a screw comes loose now and then. When the screw starts rattling around Mrs. Chase writes a play, and the play is always something with inimitable off-beat humor. Her newest work is "Bernardine" (pronounced Bernadine) which opened last evening at the Playhouse. It is a little sweetheart of a comedy.

This screw which becomes unseated within the Chase cranium doesn't go around in any set course, with the result that "Mrs. McThing" is much different from "Harvey" and "Bernardine" is not at all like either of them. The new comedy is a bit rickety as to structure, but I forgive it for so minor a frailty and salute it for the warmth, depth and perception it displays as it seeks to discover what makes adolescent boys tick so erratically.

Funny and Deep, Too.

Mrs. Chase's humor is unfailingly and subtle in "Bernardine" and her Irish fancy is at its best; but there is more than fun to her work this time. She has made a keen study of that awful, if ludicrous, period when boys aren't quite boys any more and are trying to find out just what it is they are turning into. This business of trying to find out is painful to the ex-boy, even if it does appear ludicrous to the grown-up observer. Mrs. Chase has the grace never to make fun of the boys in her play; she is on their side and she understands them.

The performances all are excellent, and the actors include a number of talented grown-ups; but the main people are seven or eight youths who might be called nice Dead End Kids. These lads love practical jokes, hang out in a 3.2 beer parlor in a western town and talk endlessly about females and their conquests over same. But they are sham hoodlums; they are good kids from good families trying to grow up.

Their leader is a fascinating young man nicknamed Beau, who has a crazy twinkle in his eye and a supple imagination. When things grow dull with his companions, he cheers them with tales of the ideal town, where the boys stay downstairs and send their parents up to bed. In his town, Sneaky Falls, Idaho, on the banks of Itchy Creek, it is the mothers who enlist in the Navy and their sons run around like crazy mailing them packages of cookies. This chap Beau (who becomes a Navy air pilot a couple of years after the play ends) has invented for the gang the ideal female. She is slinky, sexy and willing, being from Sneaky Falls, where only one word is spoken. The word is "yes." The girl's name is Bernardine—Bernardine Crudd.

The only really unhappy member of the crowd is a character named Wormy. Wormy wants to be a big wheel, a conquering male, the way the others say they are—but somehow he can't make it. His attempts at playing wolf never succeed, and none of the girls in town will date him. His mother's watchful affection bores and irks him. In one great, desperate effort to become important in the eyes of his companions, he hangs out in a hotel lobby and makes passes until he succeeds with an older woman who must be at least in her twenties, maybe thirties.

A Splendid Performance.

Wormy's adventure is agonizing and funny, and Wormy is being given a wonderful performance by Johnny Stewart. It's a beautiful role and Stewart is just the man for it. Indeed, everybody is quite right, and there is space left to mention some of them. Alney Alba is enchanting as Wormy's over-anxious mother, and Beverly Lawrence is charming as the very ladylike hotel pickup. John Kerr's portrayal of Beau glimmers with humor, and Michael Wager is fine as a disgusting eager beaver. Another of the funny young men is Fred Baker, who was until recently a DAILY NEWS copy boy.

Guthrie McClintic has directed everybody in a sunny mood. The program lists as producer Irving L. Jacobs, even though Mr. Jacobs died some months ago. "Bernardine" is a nice tribute to the man who first thought—and rightly—that the comedy should be put on a stage.

The New York Times

October 17, 1952

Mary Chase Studies Problem of Being Young in a New Comedy, 'Bernardine'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Although Mary Chase has considerable trouble with her drama exercises, she knows a lot about human beings and she is not discouraged. Leave her alone and she will make peace yet between the young and the old. "Bernardine," which opened at the Playhouse last evening, portrays the horrible problem of being adolescent. Maybe it's more than a problem; maybe it's a crime.

From the point of view of the adult, the boys that hang around the backroom of the Shamrock are odious. They are boorish, devious, clanish, smartalecky — impossible, in fact. "Bernardine" is the story of one of the boys who is girl-crazy and out of control. His mother blames the gang for his bad behavior. But this is where Mrs. Chase comes in. She realizes that the gang knows more about this boy than his mother does and that it is the gang that steadies him, counsels him and surrounds him with understanding.

* * *

As a play, "Bernardine" has plenty of faults. It mixes the simple truth about young people with some comic-book stereotypes. Put together out of many details, some of which may be superfluous, it does not really settle down to business until the evening is almost half over. A good deal of the adult dialogue is purely routine, for most of the adult scenes are merely routine devices for motivating the antagonisms of the young. And Mr. McClintic's direction is not exactly intuitive. It does not show much knowledge of children. And almost all the adult parts are poorly cast and played.

Say all this in criticism of "Bernardine." For those are serious faults in theatre expression. But the basic fact is that Mrs. Chase knows more about young people than any one writing for the stage today. She is not unaware of their awkwardness. She does not overlook their contrariness. But the author of "Harvey" and "Mrs. McThing" has her heart in the right place and her head screwed on tight; and she brings some genuine illumination into the war of the old against the young. She is kindly without being sentimental.

* * *

Despite its shortcomings as stagecraft, "Bernardine" includes some comic and some poignant scenes. Buford trying to slip away from his mother's peevish tyranny; Buford picking up an older woman and acting big beyond his years; Buford confessing all his childish bravado to the woman who knows so much more than he does; Buford's mother pleading with the gang to help — these are either amusing or touching scenes because Mrs. Chase knows what she is writing about and has not had to go to books or child counselors to understand the facts of life. She is a very refreshing lady. She has a mind and heart of her own.

Her problems as a playwright are Mr. McClintic's problems as a director, and he has not been able to help her much. Like the play, the performance is very uneven—mixing the trivial with the pertinent. But there are some strong and persuasive factors in it. As Buford, Johnny Stewart gives an excellent performance that becomes quite moving toward the end. Mr. Stewart has managed to keep the part free of adolescent cliches. He plays a normal boy with simplicity and sincerity, and gives the whole of the second act perspective.

Nor is he the only source of strength in the performance. John Kerr's reserved though responsible portrait of the gang leader is also genuine and winning. As the local heel, Michael Wager's glibness and petulance are authentic and amusing; and Camilla De Witt is fresh and enchanting as the adolescent girl responsible for Buford's rebellion. Most of the other adolescent parts are casual, but they are well cast and well acted.

By skipping nimbly through a lot of scenes, Mrs. Chase has set John Robert Lloyd a number of designing problems. "Bernardine" is in ten scenes. None of the sets is better than adequate. In fact, "Bernardine" is deficient in everything that does not matter much. But Mrs. Chase is wonderful with the things that are important. She knows her characters thoroughly and she forgives them for being human. She has the kind of humor that does not consist in telling jokes but in having a sweet and hospitable sense of proportion.

New York Herald Tribune

October 17, 1952

'Bernardine'

By WALTER F. KERR

IN "HARVEY" Mary Chase was writing about a middle-aged man who saw rabbits. In "Mrs. McThing" she was writing about an upper-class matron who saw witches. In "Bernadine" she is writing about a teen-age boy who sees girls.

Not all the girls that Buford Weldy sees are dream girls. But the principal one is. Her name is Bernardine Crud, she is "a little older" than the girls Buford knows, and she is "a little beat-up." She lives in Itchy Falls on the shores of the Sneaky River, and her eyes have a message for boys who are in a hurry to get going. It is "Live on, boy." Her vocabulary consists of a single word,—"Yes."

Buford is badly in need of this pliant femme fatale he has invented for himself while lounging with his cronies—all of them high-school "big wheels"—in the back room of the Shamrock Bar & Grill. Though he is a slick operator who knows the score, he has trouble with real girls. His earnestly passionate, Dracula-like passes don't take. Since he has been known to become violent when repulsed—he once threw Louise Hofstedder in a creek—he can't get a date, not even a blind one. Buford's problems are grave.

It should be obvious at once that in her new comedy at the Playhouse Mary Chase is once more exploring "a world no adult can enter fully—ever." There are no doubt going to be adult playgoers who won't care much about entering it, and adult playgoers who may want to get out of it early. But if you can tolerate the mysterious profundities of jive idiom at all, and if you are even mildly responsive to the soulful crises of adolescence, you may find it—as this reviewer did, so help him—a charming, funny and heart-warming evening.

As a dramatist, Mrs. Chase is loaded with faults. It is perfectly possible that she is the sloppiest scenarist now delighting the professional theater. Though "Bernardine" is a slender domestic comedy, she spreads it all over the map, trailing her characters through a half dozen sets and ten fragmentary scenes. She works the lingo of her world-weary kids well past its first freshness. She makes her adults as fey as her juveniles so that no contrast is possible and the evening suffers from its single insistent note. Sometimes she herself doesn't seem to know where her fantasy leaves off and where her real world begins. There never was a more feminine playwright: every bureau drawer is left open.

But for all her untidiness, she is gifted with genuine imagination. She is able to take you, with astounding accuracy, into a world of callow sophisticates. When the gang is mooning over a hot recording, she gets the hep talk right ("He can no longer run the distance, but he can still hurt you.") When she brings Buford Weldy bang up against an experienced woman and you think she is just going to reheat the facts-of-life scene from "Ah Wilderness," she surprises you with a wry and winning scene. She is even able to tie up her implausible plotting—and get her boy squared away with the world around him—with a few perceptive and moving lines.

The usually meticulous Guthrie McClintic has done this little mood-and-memory piece a bit of damage by directing it, here and there, for farce. But he has got some very engaging performances from a bright, personable company.

Johnny Stewart is the gangling, supercilious, and hot-breathed Buford, and he handles his key scene with an amused older woman beautifully. The transition from the comic passion of his clumsy passes, to a brooding reminiscence of the obstreperous kid he really loves, has a wonderfully gawky grace about it. John Kerr, as the biggest of the big wheels, manages the sentimental opening and closing passages skillfully, and is very funny indeed when he is spelling out his own paradise; a world in which mothers are drafted and sons send them packages of raisin cookies.

Michael Wager is properly annoying as the sort of boy who is popular with other boys' mothers and who is an authority on neuritis and infected hair follicles. Alney Alba and Beverly Lawrence make the unlikely adults reasonably appealing, and Girard Gillen, Andy Sanders, Billy James and Dave Gibbs complete the gallery of ingratiating teen-agers.

"Bernardine" has neither the consistency nor the weight of, let's say, "Catcher in the Rye," but it does have a great deal of that beguiling novel's special appeal.

New York Post

October 17, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

Trials of the Younger Generation

Being somewhat out of touch with the younger generation, I am probably in no position to tell you exactly how accurate Mary Chase is in "Bernardine," her comedy about its joys, sorrows and preoccupation with sex, which opened at the Playhouse last night. But Miss Chase, the successful author of "Harvey" and "Mrs. McThing," seems satisfied with the current status of American youth, feeling that it is loud and cynical on the surface, but tender and basically sound at heart, and she has incorporated her findings in a cheerful and optimistic little play.

Although my feelings about "Bernardine" are somewhat grumpy and crotchety, I should add hastily that those about me in the first-night audience, who appeared perhaps closer to the subject than I am, gave evidence of liking it enormously, and that I found some of it as engaging as I used to find Booth Tarkington's "Seventeen." It is my impression, though, that, unlike most of the plays that have been arriving this season, Miss Chase's comedy confined its best moments to its second half, when youth settled down to a little sobriety.

No Bernardine

It is time to tell you, I suppose, that there is no character in "Bernardine" called Bernardine. That is just the name that the boys, in their moments of fantasy, give to their ideal of femininity, and the central figure of the play, a young fellow who gets nowhere with the girls because he frightens them, applies it to the more mature blond that he picks up in a hotel lobby. It is his naivete which appeals to her, but he thinks it is his sophistication, and you may be more in agreement with Miss Chase than I am in her belief that the cream of the jest lies in his discovery that his would-be conquest is an old friend of his mother.

Let me assure you that all of this is far more harmless than it seems. For it is the playwright's optimistic contention that, while contemporary youth may be loud, blatant and given to blase and hard-boiled talk about girls when you observe its conduct superficially, it is actually shy, romantic and even idealistic when you look more carefully. She also believes that the boys may behave so wildly because the girls keep fighting them off.

Some Scenes

There are some amusing scenes in "Bernadine," such as the one in which the boys gather in a line to hide the hero from his mother in the hotel lobby, and another wherein a prissy and priggish young fellow, who is the butt of the gang, breaks down and confesses his future plans for romantic conquest. Most of the first half, however, consists of showing the boys up to their antics in the back room of a beer hall, and these episodes struck me as reasonably trying. It took me quite a while to appreciate the youthful charm.

Under Guthrie McClintic's competent direction, the acting is, so far as I know, sufficiently realistic. Johnny Stewart, who was in "The King and I" and "The Happy Time," is bearable enough as the shy youth who scares the girls, and so is John Kerr, as the leader of the basically sentimental gang. Michael Wager is the prig with the romantic dream, Camilla De Witt is the teen-age belle, Beverly Lawrence is the blond, and Alney Alba the silly mother who becomes a philosopher in the last scene. I may be alone in being chill to "Bernardine."

Journal American

October 17, 1952

Mary Chase's Play Is Full of Charm

By JOHN McCLAIN

THE excruciating agonies of the adolescent male are given a once-over-lightly in "Bernardine," a new play by Mary Chase which opened at the Playhouse Theatre last night under the auspices of the late Irving L. Jacobs and Guthrie McClintic.

Mrs. Chase, who is currently represented by "Mrs. McThing" and is still collecting royalties from "Harvey," has this time taken under consideration a day in the lives of several youngsters who are teetering on the threshold of manhood. Their Holy Grail is a legendary doll called Bernardine, a slick chick with a '52 Cadillac, the ephemeral figure that is believed to be just around the next corner.

The pursuit of this phantom provides the comedy and heartbreak, the small crises which loom so large, from which Mrs. Chase has spun her yarn.

Plenty Charming

If what emerges is a rather flimsy fabric it also must be admitted that it's plenty charming. There is only one situation of any size in the entire evening, but by the time you get to it you are so completely captivated by the kids that you have forgotten the long lapses that led up to it. Mrs. Chase has stretched a frail episode into a play and, so help me, I enjoyed it.

"Bernardine" takes an interminable time going anywhere at first. Long intervals are devoted to the curious caste system whereby a young man is admitted or rejected from the inner circle of real "wolves." One is permitted to look into the homes of some of the parents who are, of course, blandly unaware of what really goes on in the back room of the Shamrock beer parlor, where the pack congregates.

But with the beginning of the final act some form and substance develops. "Wormy" Weldy, the least successful member of the roundtable, sets forth to find Bernardine or bust. His quest leads him to the swank local hotel where, to his amazement, he succeeds in picking up a very reasonable facsimile.

She is older, but she has a lavish apartment of her own and a '52 Cadillac. On the brink of conquest, however, she discovers that his mother is one of her best friends and she thereupon turns him out into the street. He returns to the Shamrock a beaten man, convinced that he is poison to all womankind. Until, of course, the call arrives from the girl his own age—the one he always wanted anyway.

Poignant Pleasure

Sure, it's awfully light stuff; but it's played with such charm and the characters are sufficiently reminiscent that one is apt to emerge teary-eyed, probably re-living a similar episode from the past.

Johnny Stewart, as "Wormy," fairly well runs away with the big part, delivering a particularly memorable scene with Beverly Lawrence, the Tecla Bernardine, in the second act. But he is most capably assisted by John Kerr, Michael Wager, Alney Alba, as his mother, and by the various members and aspirants to the small kingdom of the back room.

John Robert Lloyd succeeded in devising a series of revolving sets which permitted the story to move through 10 scenes in excellent taste and without interruption. This is an instance in which I believe the director was greatly responsible for the performances of all concerned, for which Mr. McClintic should take the big bow.

"Bernardine" won't make theatrical history, but it will provide a lot of poignant pleasure to everyone who was once young.

"The Time of the Cuckoo"

DAILY NEWS

October 16, 1952

'Time of the Cuckoo' a Charming Romantic Comedy at the Empire

By JOHN CHAPMAN

They have been saying that the Empire Theatre will be destroyed by wreckers next year, but, thank goodness, it still sits in solid dignity across Broadway from the Opera House. And, thank goodness, there is a play in it—a charming, sentimental, romantic comedy by Arthur Laurents titled "The Time of the Cuckoo."

This play, the 279th since the house opened in 1893 with Belasco's "The Girl I Left Behind Me," does the mellow old playhouse no dishonor. It is intelligently and affectionately written, very well cast and admirably directed, and in the leading role is Shirley Booth, one of our very best actresses. If "The Time of the Cuckoo" is to be the last play at the Empire, the old house can keep her pride as her bricks and splinters come tumbling down, for the play is good theatre.

A Gentle Comedy.

It isn't a sensational play, for sensation is not its purpose. Laurents has written a gentle, perceptive comedy about an American secretary, quite a bit past her youth and still unmarried, who has earned herself a vacation in Europe and finds herself in a pleasantly located pensione edging one of the canals of Venice.

This secretary is no sex-starved spinster; she is a warm, natural, forthright American woman with no complexes who has a normal desire for affection. She finds it—or hopes she has found it—in Venice, in the person of a gallant, middle-aged shopkeeper. Her American sense of the way life should be conducted is jolted when she discovers that this man who fascinates her is married, living with his wife and several children quite contentedly, and not afraid to admit these circumstances.

Thus, the secretary comes to realize the difference between the American and the European view of morality, and a conflict seethes within her. She can have, if she chooses, a short love but a happy one—and her effort to make the choice is all there is to the play.

A New Italian.

In the first performance last evening Miss Booth gave another of her seemingly artless and effortless performances, and again demonstrated her sure instinct and fine training for the theatre. With her was a good company. Dino DiLuca, an Italian actor of great charm, played the part of the shopkeeper with engaging honesty and grace, and there were other persuasive performances by Geraldine Brooks and Donald Murphy as American honeymooners; by Lydia St. Clair as the sophisticated proprietress of a pensione; by Jane Rose and Daniel Reed as a pair of elderly tourists, and by Jose Perez as an urchin of the canals.

The garden setting by Ben Edwards is a very pleasant one, and within it Harold Clurman has directed his actors most admirably. He has given the performance the finish, the unity and the rueful humor that it deserves. "The Time of the Cuckoo" is a civilized and enjoyable play.

"THE TIME OF THE CUCKOO"

Comedy by Arthur Laurents; staged by Harold Clurman; setting by Ben Edwards; costumes by Helene Pons; presented by Robert Whitehead and Walter Fried at the Empire Theatre, October 15, 1952. The cast:

Signora Fiorla...Lydia St. Clair
Eddie Yaeger...Donald Murphy
June Yaeger..Geraldine Brooks
Giovanna.....Silva Gaselli
Leona Samish....Shirley Booth
Mrs. McIlhenny.....Jane Rose
Mr. McIlhenny.....Daniel Reed
Mauro.....Jose Perez
Renato Di Rossi..Dino Di Luca
Vito.....Ruggero Romor

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 16, 1952

High Praise Is Word For Shirley Booth

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The delicacy and honest assurance of Miss Shirley Booth's acting, and the high caliber of her supporting cast in "The Time of the Cuckoo," often combine to make you believe this is more than just a showy vehicle for a star.

Yet, despite their efforts and their piecemeal successes, the play ends up a contrived short story about superficially represented people that really has nothing very exciting or fresh to say.

Enchanted Evening.

Miss Booth plays a spinster on a fling in Italy, after a life of working to bring up younger brothers and sisters. She calls everybody "Cookie," and makes remarks such as "We could be great buddies."

She is caught up in a breathless whirl with one of those male Italian Enchanted Evenings, who runs a shop and lives away from his wife and children. Her stubborn romanticism keeps her from indulging in the liaison he offers, as not good enough. She continues to be repelled by what seems his immoral outlook, until she wears out his feeling for her just about the time she is ready to relent and capitulate.

The incidents which repel her muff their purpose because you never know whether they are coincidental accidents or deliberate skullduggery. They involve the Italian's fooling her about an antique, borrowing money to buy her a gift, then getting bills for her on the black market which turn out to be counterfeit.

While his guilt is in doubt, the whole moral issue which is the theme of the play, is beggared.

For a dramatic payoff, the heroine gets drunk at a martini party she gives, almost breaks up a young married couple by gratuitously telling on the husband, and drives her own near-catch away by her boorish behavior.

The play is very matter-of-fact and rarely lets her suggest anything not flatly stated. With a subtle vocal range and complete submission to the atmosphere, she creates an emotional dimension that is not in the words.

When the jokes are weighty, she deftly mutters them under her breath or twists their inflection till they sound piquant.

"The Time of the Cuckoo" gives Miss Booth the chance to conquer an unfamiliar type of role, with this serious romantic character, and she does it so sweetly and expertly that you feel she might revive "The Bells" with success, if she chose.

Dino DiLuca plays her love with suavity and passionate sincerity, in a memorable American theater debut. As a sophisticated landlady, Lydia St. Clair makes a striking appearance and plays with entire conviction.

Geraldine Brooks is most touching as an uncertain little bride, and Donald Murphy is genuine in the thin role of her husband.

The play has an interesting setting by Ben Edwards of a Venetian garden against a background of shimmering reflections in water.

The New York Times
October 16, 1952

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Arthur Laurents has written a lovely play for Shirley Booth, and that makes it fine for all of us. "The Time of the Cuckoo" he calls it ironically. It was tenderly acted last evening at the Empire, where it ought to keep open house for a long time.

It tells the story of a friendly American spinster who goes to Europe, hoping in the back of her head that she may have a romance. She has one in Venice, with a middle-aged Venetian who is married and has a large family. According to Mr. Laurents and to Europeans in general, Americans understand neither Americans nor Europeans, although Europeans understand everything with that inscrutable old-world wisdom of theirs. The romance ends disastrously for the American lady, whose pride has been thoroughly shattered.

* * *

Whether Mr. Laurents' point of view is a contribution to knowledge is beside the point. For "The Time of the Cuckoo" is written with grace by a man who is mastering the theatre and who can afford to take liberties with conventional forms. Mr. Laurents' story grows naturally. He introduces his characters at leisure in the garden of a tourists' pension—a young American couple, an aging American couple, a smart, shrewd Venetian widow, the American spinster and the philanderer who tries to fulfill her dream.

Although Mr. Laurents has some thoughtful comments to make on the people of today, he is anything but dogmatic. Writing like an artist with pleasant detachment, he lets the story come spontaneously out of the people he is looking at. The dialogue is light and amusing, spiced with some pertinent analyses of character when the time comes for a decision. Nothing is forced or insisted upon. These are all agreeable people, living quietly, wondering, hoping, meeting crises in their own way. As a job of playwriting, "The Time of the Cuckoo" is mature work—modern in the freedoms it takes, decently sympathetic to the characters it discusses, humorous, sunny and reflective.

* * *

In his sensitive direction, Harold Clurman has caught perfectly the mood of the piece and woven it without effort into a finely textured performance. No doubt other actresses could play the part of the American spinster. But now that Miss Booth has invested it with the sweetness and glow and simplicity of her acting, it is impossible to think of the character apart from herself. Leona Samish, for that is the character's name, goes through a painful emotional ordeal in the course of the story. After a casual beginning her dream seems to come true, but it is shattered at the moment when she is enjoying it most ecstatically.

Although Miss Booth never gives the impression of being dramatic, she gathers all the good-will, emotional turbulence and chagrin of the character in an immensely dramatic performance that is warm, easy-going and lovable. Miss Booth had a theatre full of friends when the curtain went up. But everybody was in love with her when the final curtain descended.

For that matter, she is among friends on the stage. In designing the scenery and lighting it, Ben Edwards has sketched an inviting, lazy garden where everyone can relax. Actors look at their best in a companionable environment like that. As the middle-aged suitor who is attracted to Leona, Dino DiLuca gives a langorous mature and ingratiating performance that mirrors her romance and gives the play an unobtrusive distinction.

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Lydia St. Clair as the cool, worldly keeper of the pension, Donald Murphy as the restless young American painter and Geraldine Brooks as his philistine wife, Jane Rose and Daniel Reed as the aging American tourists, Silva Gaselli as the ebullient servant of the house—play with an ease and deftness of outline that complete Mr. Laurents' portrait of some ordinary people. Everything in "The Time of the Cuckoo" depends on style and insight. But no one's style is any purer than Miss Booth's. What she brings to the part and the play comes straight from a heart that is generous, honest and adorable.

Journal American
October 16, 1952

First Genuine Hit Of the Season

By JOHN McCLAIN

IT HAS BEEN reported that the hallowed Empire Theatre will be demolished after its present incumbent folds, but after taking a good look at the incumbent last night one would advise the wreckers to put away the dynamite for many months to come. For "The Time of the Cuckoo" appears to be the season's first formidable success.

Arthur Laurents has written an adult and incisive comedy-drama and Shirley Booth and her supporting cast play it to perfection. This is a drama involving people we know, whose joys and sorrows are as uncomplicated as our own, who behave with simple fidelity.

The comedy and pathos derive from character; a line is not funny or tragic of itself, but rather because of our knowledge of the person who delivers it. This is good writing and good acting.

Half the Moon

Laurents has chosen as his theme a platitude as old as Plato: Be content with something less than the Moon. In his version he employs an American ex-secretary who, in the course of touring Italy, falls in love with a sort of road company Ezio Pinza, a Venetian glass merchant.

When she discovers he is married she is temporarily disillusioned, but when it becomes apparent, later, that he only wanted her for her money she chases him out of the place.

The next day he returns with proof that his emotions were sincere and non-financial. She begs forgiveness and hopes they can start over, but he counters, logically, with the opinion that he is too old and tired to deal with so many suspicions. Love has left him. She winds up on stage, alone, hoping she had settled for half the moon.

Of course there is more to the story than that. There is a delightful single set by Ben Edwards, depicting the patio of a Venetian pensione, where all the action takes place. And there is a sub-plot involving two American newlyweds, Donald Murphy and Geraldine Brooks, who manage quite skillfully to paraphrase the main theme in reverse: both possessing the moon but fighting like fiends for fear they'll lose a small portion.

And there's Lydia St. Clair, as the really sophisticated mistress of the pensione, who has a passing fling with Murphy during one of his spats with his wife, and who then withdraws into the security of her knowledge that all of us are happier with the joys of the moment, shooting short of perfection.

Engaging and Able

There are the usual two American tourists in the play, the squares from the midwest making their first trip to Europe, but in this instance they are neither embarrassingly written nor overacted by Jane Rose and Daniel Reed.

Shirley Booth has never been given a greater perimeter for her established talents: an ingenious entrance scene (funny), sympathetic interlude, love scene (schmaltz), drunken sequence (comedy-pathos) and finale.

In all this she is abetted by Dino DiLuca, an Italian import making his first Broadway appearance. He is an engaging and accomplished performer, suave and grey at the temples, and it is no wonder that Shirley doesn't quite believe him at first. He fooled me.

Plaudits to Robert Whitehead and Walter Fried, who produced, and Harold Clurman, who directed. Let's keep the old Empire open for another 60 years.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
October 16, 1952

'The Time of the Cuckoo'

By WALTER F. KERR

TOWARD the end of "The Time of the Cuckoo," Shirley Booth stands alone in a deserted Italian garden, a middle-aged woman whose friends have slipped off to their own romances and whose last chance at affection has just passed by. Puzzled and defensive, she cries to herself, "I'm warm and I'm nice and I'm bright!"

And that's just what Shirley Booth is. She's nice and she's warm and she's bright. From the time that she comes over a little Venetian bridge, wearing a floppy hat and tourist glasses, to the time that she blows her nose, packs her bag, and heads back to a prosaic job in America, she is gracious, funny, and very touching.

The new play at the Empire profits enormously from her presence. Her rueful smile as she pretends that she is having a good time on her European holiday, her almost imperceptible stammer as she sideswipes an unfamiliar Italian phrase, make Leona Samish a genuine and a winning figure. The sudden embarrassment with which she realizes that a handsome shopkeeper is really interested in her, and the choked little laugh with which she conceals her happiness, are very moving.

But for all the sensitivity which Miss Booth brings the piece, and for all that she has been given some shrewd and observant things to say, Arthur Laurents' play remains an uncomfortably tenuous experience in the theater.

Mr. Laurents has a point to make, or at least a cultural conflict to explore. He has noticed that Continentals have a fairly relaxed attitude toward sex ("In Italy there is no divorce, only discretion") and that Americans, whether they mean to or not, hew to a stubborn rectitude in such matters. He believes that his ingratiating Italian shopkeeper cannot help wanting a casual fling with the attractive American who walks into his store. He also believes that the American, when all is said and done, cannot help turning him down. And he writes a couple of pithy speeches to outline this inevitable clash of temperaments, backgrounds and morals.

But the struggle becomes a little desultory as it goes along. Partly, I think, because Mr. Laurents has flipped all of his cards on to the table too soon. In the second of six scenes he has already drawn a firm line between "realist" and "puritan" and there is little left to do but restate the argument and thin out the tension. He has also chosen to resolve the amorous give-and-take not on its own terms but in terms of some fairly seedy financial misunderstandings.

Mostly, though, Mr. Laurents may have robbed his play of increasing emotional interest by making his Italian just a shade too realistic. Renato di Rossi prides himself on the candor with which he explains to his conquest that he does not love her. With equal realism, he sends his son to postpone an assignation. By the time he has realistically permitted the girl to pick up a variety of tabs, and presented her with a necklace which is not precisely paid for, we begin to become a little realistic about him. Though Dino DiLuca plays the laissez-faire lover with great persuasiveness, he is not entirely able to conceal the fact that it is a rather bleak and unsubstantial relationship he is offering, and we take to feeling that Miss Booth may be better off with her postcards and souvenirs.

Harold Clurman has drawn accurate and perceptive performances from Geraldine Brooks as a young wife who cannot help irritating her artist husband, from Donald Murphy as the self-centered artist, from Lydia St. Clair as the live-and-let-live proprietor of a tourist pension, and from a vigorous youngster named Jose Perez.

"The Time of the Cuckoo" may be the last play to open at the Empire, if plans for its dismantling proceed on schedule. It is too bad that Mr. Laurents hasn't provided it with a thoroughly distinguished finale. But Shirley Booth, at least, is in the best tradition of the house.

New York Post
October 16, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

The American Spinster in Venice

The impact of Italy on the American visitor has long been a favorite theme of our writers, and Arthur Laurents turns to it in his new play, "The Time of the Cuckoo," which opened at the Empire Theater last night. Aided by the playing of the unfailing Shirley Booth and a fine cast, the skillful and intelligent staging of Harold Clurman, and the dramatist's own sensitive feeling for national differences, Mr. Laurents almost succeeds in giving the familiar subject matter freshness and emotional forcefulness, but, although his work has many points of thoughtful interest, I don't think he quite brings it off.

It would perhaps be a little unfair to "The Time of the Cuckoo" to emphasize too strongly familiarity of its story outline, because Mr. Laurents is less interested in pure narrative than he is in the conflicts of character his story engenders. But it is also impossible not to call attention to the fact that his plot has to do with the usual matter of the guileless and lonely American spinster, on her first trip to Europe, who falls in love with a sophisticated Italian and comes out of the brief affair rueful, saddened and presumably a little wiser and more understanding.

With Miss Booth playing the spinster with the touching beauty we have come to expect of her and a fine new actor from Italy named Dino DiLuca offering a splendid performance as the Venetian lover, the story takes on considerably more reality and interest than it captures in most versions of the tale, and, for almost the entire first half of the evening, the play succeeds in being absorbing. It is in the second half, when Mr. Laurents is beginning to resolve the conflicts of character and nationality he has raised, that it seems to me "The Time of the Cuckoo" creates doubts in the viewer's mind.

It is my impression, at least, that, once the playwright has brought his hero and heroine together and started them on their brief and tormented romance, he has some trouble, indeed as much trouble as they have, in getting them out of their difficult situation. And I think he makes things considerably harder for himself by introducing as counterpoint the secondary plot about a restless American artist and his inferiority-wracked young wife, and the artist's casual liaison with an amorous boarding-house keeper. It is my impression that the second narrative tends to add confusion, rather than clarification.

In the end, I find myself in some difficulty as to what the dramatist has been driving at. Although he has been showing his American woman as simple and naïve and his Italians as civilized and complex, the affair comes to an end apparently because the Venetian shopkeeper finds the spinster too complicated for his simple taste. Perhaps Mr. Laurents meant this as an ironic point, but I can't believe that he makes it seem so. In the course of the narrative, there is a great deal that is interesting about the conflicts of national viewpoint, but the final effect is just a trifle dissatisfying.

Despite all of my complaints, "The Time of the Cuckoo" is, to pay it a fairly minor compliment, the first work of the new season worthy of serious contemplation. And its production is excellent. In addition to Mr. Clurman's creative direction and the brilliant playing of Miss Booth and Mr. DiLuca, there must be high praise for Ben Edwards' setting and the performances of the entire cast particularly Donald Murphy and Geraldine Brooks, as the young American couple, and Lydia St. Clair as the Italian woman. Nor would I want to omit mention of Silva Gaselli, Jose Perez, Ruggero Romor, Daniel Reed and Jane Rose in lesser parts. I wish I could be a little happier over the final result.

Daily Mirror

October 16, 1952

'The Time of the Cuckoo' Is Short on Action

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Things are picking up on our current tour of Italy. Having visited Rome, via "In Any Language"; an anonymous town in North Italy, via "The Gambler"; a village in Northeast Italy, via "Buttrio Square"; we finally arrived in Venice last evening, through courtesy of "The Time of the Cuckoo."

Someone once observed that Venice was fortunate in being poor, in never having accumulated enough money to spoil its ancient charm and beauty. Well, according to playwright Arthur Laurents, the citizens of Venice as well as its city fathers are still short of lire.

This is surprising, because they are so practical, while sightseers from America are romantic. Leona Samish, a super-secretary, spent her early years in the U. S. rearing her younger kin. That task of devotion accomplished, she had enough stashed away in the bank for a trip abroad. She was famished for the attentions of a handsome signor, and went overboard for the elderly, impoverished, ardent Renato Di Rossi, despite the fact that he was married and the father of a big family.

Eddie Yaeger, a young artist stopping at the same pensione with his volatile bride, had a brief affair with the cultured and realistic proprietress. The Venetians took these things as a matter of course, though the Americans, willing enough to enjoy them, were squeamish. Both Leona and Eddie were disillusioned by the final curtain's fall.

"The Time of the Cuckoo" is a mood rather than a play. It is long on talk and short on action. It takes a couple of lengthy scenes to achieve anything resembling drama. The situations are weak, sketchily built, but some of the dialogue is quite amusing. Frankly, it would be an innocuous bore had not producers Robert Whitehead and Walter Fried landed Shirley Booth to star in it.

Miss Booth, as the spinsterish, lovelorn Leona, acts with ingratiating humor and a touching emotion. She, rather than Laurents, brings completeness and a measure of depth to the role of the foolish pilgrim. In fact, she makes it her play, filling in many empty passages. Make no mistake about it, she has earned the right to stardom. She has developed a large and extremely loyal following.

Dino Diluca had an auspicious debut in New York as the gently amorous and well-meaning Di Rossi. Geraldine Brooks and Donald Murphy are excellent as the tempestuous Yaegers. Lydia St. Clair etched the mistress of the pensione with fine style.

Harold Clurman has gotten everything possible from a vague and underwritten script. His direction does much to explain points that author Laurents slurred over. And Ben Edwards has designed an atmospheric pensione courtyard.

The first-nighters rocked the Empire's venerable rafters with their applause, and there was a calendar in the lobby with dates marked out as "sold" for various performances over the next three months. This would indicate that Miss Booth has become a box-office magnet. Though we came away with a negative impression of the new arrival, the initial customers were demonstratively enthusiastic.

It was announced that "The Time of the Cuckoo" is the 279th and final occupant of the Empire, which, unfortunately, is to be torn down to make way for an office building. A handsome souvenir program was distributed to the sentimentalists present to celebrate this regrettable event.

"Buttrio Square"

Journal American

October 15, 1952

Exuberant Musical A Strange Melange

By JOHN McCLAIN

IT SEEMS there are some American troops stationed in a charming Italian village just after the war, and the first thing you know they are dancing and singing with the local girls and carrying on like crazy. This is the point at which the curtain rises on "Buttrio Square," a new musical starring Billy Gilbert which opened last night at the New Century Theatre.

Nobody can quarrel with this kick-off, but what goes on after that is a strange melange of some altogether excellent singing, many embarrassingly feeble jokes and situations, a couple of truly fine and exciting ballets—the sum total strung together by the flimsiest and most incredible book since Oliver Optic. Thus:

The dashing American Captain is secretly married to the daughter of the mean Baron who owns the village; just when she discovers she is about to bear him a child a nasty American lady reporter turns up and claims he is her husband all the time.

Trouble, Trouble...

This leads to no end of trouble all around, but it is finally solved when the heartsick bride goes away and has her baby and gives it to the wife of the childless Mayor, who has long been deceived into thinking that one might be coming to him. Of course, the contemptible correspondent was never really married to our hero, and she admits as much in the end. The Mayor adopts four children and the final curtain falls on an hysterically happy scene.

The chief trouble is, I guess, that we're all spoiled. We've been spoiled by "Pal Joey," "Carousel," "South Pacific," "Guys and Dolls," and "King and I." We've come to expect too much from a musical; we examine the plot as though it had to make sense, rather than just furnish a pleasant background for some songs and comedy.

It's a pity, for there is so much to applaud in "Buttrio Square." It has youth and exuberance, as good choreography as you'll see in town and a score that is sometimes brilliant and never bland.

There is a remarkably good performance by Susan Johnson, who is in the army despite her protests that she is a girl; the singing of Lois Hunt and Lawrence Brooks is solid and professional, above and beyond the usual call of musical comedy

"BUTTRIO SQUARE"

Musical comedy with book by Billy Gilbert and Gen Genovese; music by Arthur Jones and Fred Stamer; lyrics by Mr. Genovese; based on a play by Hal Cranton from an original story by Mr. Genovese; choreographed and staged by Eugene Loring; costumes supervised by Sal Anthony; orchestrations by Don Walker; choral arrangements by Maurice Levine; presented by Mr. Genovese and Edward Woods at the New Century Theatre, October 14, 1952. The cast:

Michelino.....David Kurlan
Padre.....Vincent Barbi
Angela.....Rina Falcone
Maria.....Joan Morton
Elizabetta.....Ann Needham
Dominic.....Lionel Ames
Baron D'Alessandro.....
Ernest Sarracino
Rocco.....Ferdinand Hil
Vittorio.....James MacCracken
Cassio.....Orville Sherman
Pietro.....Ted Thurston
Emelia.....Jane Harven
Francesca.....Marie Gibson
Pappa Mario.....Billy Gilbert
Norina.....Charlotte Jones
Carlo.....Henry Hamilton
Sergeant McKenzie..Walter Black
Captain Steve Dickson.....
Lawrence Brooks
Private Poole..James Tarbutton
Tabulator.....Leon Daniels
Marisa D'Alessandro..Lois Hunt
Private Burns.....Joe Mantell
Corporal Gower.....Al Checco
Private Whitfield..George Reeder
Private Webster....Don Driver
Terry Patterson..Susan Johnson
Joan Wellington...Marti Stevens

duty; the "Fraternization Ballet," in the second act, will rank with the four or five best on display hereabout.

It is the more regrettable, then, that long lapses of double-zero separate the numbers, that one is seldom aroused to the slightest interest or amusement in the strange maneuvers of the characters.

Too, Too Lovable

Billy Gilbert, who is co-author of the book with Gen Genovese, plays the role of the lovable Mayor, and he was just frankly too lovable for me. His tecnnique, long practiced in the cinema, involves lovable double-takes, lovable tears and kisses, and a heart so filled with gold that it can barely beat. He is a skilled and respected actor, but I wish he'd written himself a funnier and less saccharine part.

However, merit badges should go to the members of the singing and dancing ensembles, and to Eugene Loring, who directed the entire production, choreography included; and to Arthur Jones and Fred Stamer, for the music.

One hopes that much of this same talent and enthusiasm will return to us soon in a locale more promising than "Buttrio Square."

New York Post

October 15, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Show Known as 'Buttrio Square'

"Never a dull moment," says one of the characters in "Buttrio Square," the new musical comedy that opened at the Century Theater last night, and I'm afraid an untruer word was never spoken on a stage. For, if there is one single factor that stands out in connection with "Buttrio Square," it is an almost overpowering dullness; a dullness that eats into the very soul and transcends all the vigorous and rather hectic dancing with which Eugene Loring, the director, has attempted to enliven a singularly unhappy enterprise.

It seems a pity, because all the news accounts that have preceded the arrival of the new work have indicated the greatest courage, enterprise and financial sacrifice on the part of the members of the cast in their gallant determination to see that the show went on despite all obstacles. Such enterprise deserved a happier reward, but the trouble is that the chief obstacle was, not financial, but the looming presence of one of the clumsiest and most unbearable books that ever caused a musical comedy to sink with all hands.

Soldiers and Civilians

This hapless libretto is based on the fraternization between American troops and the civilians of an Italian village in the days shortly after the late war, and quite a pleasant idea for a musical comedy it would seem, too. It is what the authors have done with the idea that proved fatal. They have devised a narrative about a secret marriage between an American officer and an Italian girl in the period when fraternization was forbidden, and the tedium and apathy that result are not agreeable to behold. Nor can I say much for an emotional scene in which Billy Gilbert, the movie comic, finds that he is really not a father.

The authors have something potentially a little better in the subordinate idea about a WAC, who, because she bears a boy's name, is listed as a man and placed in the Army, but they don't do very much with it, either. At least, though, it permits Susan Johnson, who plays the part, to have a role with some life in it, and I can say for Miss Johnson that, despite a slight tendency to comic excess, she adds the one note of brightness to an evening sorely in need of it.

Songs and Dances

Compared to the overpowering libretto, the other elements of "Buttrio Square" seem fairly tolerable, although it can hardly be said that they approach distinction. The score by Arthur Jones and Fred Stamer struck me as pleasantly commonplace, with a song called "I Keep Telling Myself" the air I seem to remember. As for the dancing, Mr. Loring has made it properly lively, but there is one number in which the dancers, after being cursed by a mad old woman, think they are being pursued by tarantulas, and I thought it was dreadful.

As I've said Miss Johnson is the one member of the cast who has a part permitting her to be passably entertaining. Lawrence Brooks, as the Captain, and Lois Hunt, as the Italian girl, sing well, but their romantic roles would baffle even more notable performers. Billy Gilbert, who used to be a movie specialist in sneezing, has written himself a sentimental characterization as a poor old fellow with delusions of fatherhood, and I think I even prefer him sneezing. "Buttrio Square" could set American musical comedy back quite a way.

New York Herald Tribune

October 15, 1952

'Buttrio Square

By WALTER F. KERR

ALL kinds of things have been happening to "Buttrio Square." Half of its financing disappeared during rehearsal. Directors were switched in midstream. It had to postpone. The acting company had to dig into their own pockets to see that the curtain went up. And the worst thing of all happened to it Tuesday night: it opened.

Knowing the vicissitudes that have beset a gallant crew, no one could go to the Century last night without crossing his fingers and wishing everybody well. During the overture you hoped it would be good. During the first number you hoped it would be good. After that you just hoped it would be over.

For "Buttrio Square" is, after all, a wistful little orphan of a musical comedy with no music, no comedy, and not even very much scenery. I guess the best way to give you the picture is to run down the musical numbers:

The show opens on one of those picturesque Italian streets with an exhuberant band of peasant boys and girls singing something to the effect that this is census day (in Buttrio Square). It seems that this little occupied village—the time is 1948—wants to turn itself into a town but it is just one citizen shy of the number needed to qualify.

Soon every one settles down in the open air—the boys' heads on the girls' laps—to sing that Every Day Is a Holiday (in Buttrio Square). Shortly thereafter we discover that a local lass named Marisa is secretly married, against Army regulations to a Captain Steve Dickson, and she moons off into a ballad called "I'll Tell the World."

This bit of lyrical primitivism, a small masterpiece of its kind, emphasizes that she wants the gentle breeze to know she's in love and that she'd very much like to tell all the birds about the bliss of a kiss. Next, Steve himself turns up to give Italy the nod in a rousing compliment called "No Place Like This Country (in the Spring)." His G. I. underlings, however, reply with an equally rousing complaint called "Take It Away (And Give Us the U. S. A.)."

It is time for comedy now, an element which is supplied—I regret to say—by a young lady in oversize fatigues who informs us that she meant to enter the WAC. Her name, however, happened to be Terry and she was shipped off to Fort Dix, enlisted as a male, and has been unable to correct her status ever since. She lights into a song called "Get Me Out," which details how her drillmaster used to tell her to 'stick out her chest,' and so forth.

Marisa becomes pregnant, and the impending baby—which, incidentally, will swell the local population to the desired figure—is to be palmed off on the ancient but robust Mayor of Buttrio Square. The Mayor, played by Billy Gilbert with every jowl rustling, gives vent to a sentimental hymn known as "I'm Gonna Be a Pop." Thereafter the lovers quarrel and Steve laments that "One is a Lonely Number (unless you can add or multiply)." What he is trying to say, he explains, is that "one plus one is two."

The second act has some further observations to make on the wretchedness of lovers ("I keep telling myself it's foolish, this parody of romance, did it ever have a chance?") and the dust and ashes love is likely to turn to ("There's nothing left but only my thoughts in reverie.") It also has a Eugene Loring ballet—"Fraternization"—which no sooner threatens to bring the stage to some kind of exciting life than it decides to talk itself to death. There is no doubt a case to be made for the ballet with dialogue, but in this instance the mounting musical line is simply chopped off by hoary jokes ("All the girls are going to the United States, but I'm going to Texas") or by lame and obvious comment which the movement never requires.

There is one modestly attractive melody—"I Keep Telling Myself"—but the best that can be said for the score as a whole is that it isn't derivative. At least I never heard anything like it before.

Billy Gilbert sputters apoplectically, spits out his unfinished sentence, and charges through his entire repertoire of delayed takes. Lawrence Brooks salvages a little dignity out of the sorry enterprise, and Al Checco, Lois Hunt, and Susan Johnson work like demons.

But I am afraid things are pretty deadly (in Buttrio Square).

The New York Times

October 15, 1952

'Buttrio Square,' a New Musical Play, Stars Billy Gilbert at the New Century

By BROOKS ATKINSON

"Buttrio Square," which opened at the New Century last evening, is the sort of busy musical play that asks an impertinent question: How did so many competent people ever get into such a jam? From the minute the curtain goes up on an Italian village, the stage is squirming with activity. Groups of villagers come on like explosions from an engine that is not thoroughly tuned; there is enough plot, with Billy Gilbert bulging in the middle of it, to outfit ten tab shows for the rest of the season.

Out of respect for the talent of some of the people involved and for the hard work that everyone has squandered on it, an idle theatregoer hates to say the thing that is obvious. But "Buttrio Square" is in an obsolete vein. The book by Mr. Gilbert and Gen Genovese strikes a low intelligence quotient; and Eugene Loring's stage direction is like rush-hour on the subway.

* * *

Even good things are hard to recognize in circumstances like this. The good things probably include a sky-larking ballet celebrating the end of non-fraternizing by the army of occupation, though the dancing is not exactly polished. Arthur Jones and Fred Stamer, putting their heads together, have written some pleasant tunes. "No Place Like This Country," well sung by Lawrence Brooks; "I'll Tell the World," also well sung by Lois Hunt, and "Get Me Out," sung with impudent humor and professional style by Susan Johnson, are a vast improvement over the show as a whole.

In fact, THE TIMES' hired playgoer took quite a fancy to Miss Johnson's breezy acting, which gives the show the new look now and then. And Al Checco, playing a bookish corporal with horrifying nonchalance, is another full-fledged professional. He has invented a comic style for a minor part and he keeps it fresh and pert throughout the evening. Miss Johnson and Mr. Checco are the only actors who poke their heads through the dead-level of mediocrity that has overwhelmed "Buttrio Square."

* * *

Since Mr. Gilbert is down as one of the co-authors, he cannot blame the writers for the part he is playing. He is starred, it says in small print on the program, but his part seems to have no connection with the play. As a lovable Italian villager, Mr. Gilbert stammers coyly, seldom finishes a sentence, raises his eyes to heaven in sentimental anguish and fumbles everything in an old-fashioned comic way. As a writer Mr. Gilbert has made his job as an actor impossible.

A certain malicious logic runs through the whole production. For want of an idea, the book is muddled. For want of a book, the direction is muddled. Once "Buttrio Square" gets off to a hackneyed start, nothing can change the race toward oblivion. Even Samuel Leve's scenery is stereotyped. How do stage people get into these jams?

Daily Mirror

October 15, 1952

'Buttrio Square' Is Dated And Dull Musical

By ROBERT COLEMAN

It was as if there had never been an "Oklahoma!" a "King and I" or a "Guys and Dolls" at the Century Theatre last evening. For Gen Genovese and Edward Woods unveiled an old-fashioned musical there called "Buttrio Square." A musical which profited not a whit from the lessons to be learned by study of such superlative song-and-dancers as we have cited above.

The music by Arthur Jones and Fred Stamer is pleasant enough, but lacks distinction. The tunes are hardly candidates for a discriminating playgoer's memory book. The lyrics by Genovese are pedestrian. And the book by Billy Gilbert and Genovese is of the primitive variety. Choreographer Eugene Loring has struggled valiantly to lend a semblance of quality to the new arrival.

Loring's dances are a blend of modern, ballet and hot hoofing. There's even a touch of good old ballroom here and there. They are by far the best thing in "Buttrio Square." They are performed by a flock of talented and enthusiastic young steppers. These kids give their all in what we fear is a lost cause.

The libretto has to do with American soldiers stationed in an Italian village after World War II. Their commanding officer falls in love with and secretly marries the daughter of the leading citizen. Everything would have been all right had not a nasty femme war correspondent pretended to have prior claims on him. But everything is straightened out in the end, after innumerable jokes about babies, etc.

Genovese and Woods have done well by the vocal as well as the dance corps. Lawrence Brooks, who won salutes in "Song of Norway," and Lois Hunt, formerly of the Metropolitan Opera Company, sing the score to the hilt, as the captain and his bride. Susan Johnson, a saucy blonde soubrette, is excellent as a WAC who landed by mistake in a man's army. And Marti Stevens is easy on the eyes as the troublesome reporter.

The likable Billy Gilbert labors courageously with material unworthy of him. But, after all, he has no one to blame but himself, for he wrote much of his own dreary dialogue. Very early in the evening a character remarked that he didn't want to hear any more old jokes, and his comedy team mate replied that that was all he had to offer. And it was, too.

All concerned with "Buttrio Square" knocked themselves out to please. They worked like beavers. They twirled with verve, and sang their hearts out. They made you want to cheer their efforts and embrace their vehicle.

But the truth is that "Buttrio Square" sets back the clock. It has nothing but ingratiating vivacity and high spirits to recommend it. The stars and the younger members of the company merit citations for courage under fire. But they've been booby-trapped by a dated and dull musical.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 15, 1952

Buttrio Square,' New Musical

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

If the energy and spirit of the ensemble, and the fresh comic presence of Susan Johnson, were the sole gauges for "Buttrio Square" the new musical would be a raging hit.

The truth is, though, that it is a sketchy show, with lots of brightness and gaiety and also some pretty dreary ideas. This is the show which was resuscitated by the last-minute financing by a syndicate of the players. It certainly looked as if all the dancers had invested, because they are seldom still, and they step their hearts out while they are in motion.

Billy Gilbert is starred and credited with co-authorship of the book. He plays a bumbling would-be mayor of the Italian village of the title, which will become a town when the census reaches 2000. His allotted story line is an embarrassing narrative about his elderly hopes for fatherhood.

At the Helm.

Marti Stevens emerges from night clubs to appear as the menace to the young lovers, and looks sleek while she sings in a voice that comes over the footlights in a haunting manner.

In the turbulent course of getting "Buttrio Square" to a premiere, choreographer Eugene Loring took over the direction of the whole show. If you like dancing and singing with verve and joyousness, you might well wish he had been longer at the helm.

The opening is a lengthy sequence which plants story ideas in song, but also cavorts around the stage with endless energy. Over and over when things threaten to lag, the dancers rip out from the wings and needle the evening again.

Like a Revue.

Although "Buttrio Square" has more than a fair share of plot, it is at its best when the story is shoved aside for fast and furious musical episodes. This general rule holds forth for most of the first act. The show takes a sharp downhill pitch in the second, when the story assumes prominence.

Despite the plotting, about a girl who is drafted as a GI because the government never understood she was a twin, and a humorless

treatment of an old Gilbert and Sullivan mixed-baby situation, the work as a whole has a curious resemblance to a revue.

Perhaps that is because its parts are so much better than its whole. On a single hearing, it did not seem to me that any of the songs were hit parade material, but they are fancily arranged, and the more lyrical ones are given the works in high style by Lois Hunt and Lawrence Brooks.

Funny in Overalls.

The aforementioned Miss Johnson plays the femme GI, and she has the touch and timing of a veteran. She suggests some of the best features of June Allyson and Eve Arden, a mighty combine in one little girl, and manages to be very funny in overalls without for a moment ceasing to be feminine.

When there seemed no logical way to close the first act Loring provided a modern version of the Tarantella, which certainly succeeds in getting your mind off the book for the intermission. Later there is a charming fraternization ballet, sketchy perhaps, with its multitude of ideas, but chattily conceived and sharply performed.

DAILY NEWS

October 15, 1952

'Buttrio Square' Arrives; It Was Quite a Struggle—and It Still Is

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The opening at the Century Theatre last evening of "Buttrio Square," a musical, was a triumph—but not artistically. Readers of theatrical news columns have been kept informed of the financial and production problems this show has surmounted, and the story of how "Buttrio Square" finally managed to get to the Century is an exciting, interesting and touching tale of show business. This story, in fact, would make a much better book for a musical than the book of "Buttrio Square" itself, which is overlong and mostly dull.

The show was beset by apparently insuperable difficulties, but the many people who had faith in it somehow managed to triumph over adversity and finally got it to Broadway last night. Even the cast—numerous, attractive and good-humored—put up money to keep it alive. Such determination and such devotion should, in a just world, be rewarded by success—but I am doubtful of the success of "Buttrio Square."

Second Rate Stuff.

The musical doesn't deserve such determination and devotion, for its quality is second-rate. The book, by Gen Genovese and Billy Gilbert, is a sprawling tale of a GI-occupied Italian hamlet which needs one more citizen—even a new baby will do—to give it enough population to make it an incorporated village. The new baby is produced in accordance with the processes of nature, and too much of the plot involves speculation as to whether funnyman Gilbert or baritone Lawrence Brooks is the father.

The music, by Arthur Jones and Fred Stamer, struck my ear regularly but monotonously. Most of it seems formless and undisciplined, lacking the neatness and compactness of well-made Tin Pan Alley stuff. Formless and undisciplined, too, are the wandering lyrics by Gen Genovese.

Too Much Ballet

And then there are the ballets. Eugene Loring is a good choreographer and some of his dance patterns and innovations in "Buttrio Square" are interesting—but they, too, are undisciplined and overlong. Apparently, everybody was so glad to get the show on the Century's stage that nobody had the heart to get tough and give it pace by severe editing.

Brooks sings well as a captain of the U. S. occupation forces. His love interest is Lois Hunt, who sings nicely enough. The comedienne, Susan Johnson, does manage a lively moment or two in the role of a WAC who has been assigned to a GI company by mistake because her first name is the masculine one of Terry. Billy Gilbert is, of course, Billy Gilbert—large, affable, stuffed with double-takes and generally likable. He plays the part of the new mayor of the new village of Buttrio Square. He should have got his town better organized before he and scene designer Samuel Leve set it up on the Century's stage.

"The Gambler"

The New York Times

October 14, 1952

Alfred Drake in an Italian Morality Drama, Put on the Stage by Herman Shumlin

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Anyone with fortitude enough to visit "The Gambler" two or three times, might come away with some understanding of the circumlocutions of Ugo Betti's thought. He is an Italian lawyer who speculates about good and evil—a little of Pirandello in his method, a little of Freud in his thinking, with perhaps a touch of Sartre in his knack of rationalizing life.

After one visit to the Lyceum, where "The Gambler" opened last evening, this reporter is willing to leave the job of final understanding to people who are fonder of puzzles, and who are less distressed by the absence of life in plays that discuss life portentously.

* * *

But this much, at least, must be said in honor of the production. It is the freshest piece of stagecraft in many months. Under Herman Shumlin's direction, which has seldom been better, Jo Mielziner has designed a stark and beautiful setting that makes Mr. Betti's abstract morality play look incisive and brilliant. And the acting by a cast headed by Alfred Drake is somber, terse, and effective. Except for the script, the performance might be one of the most stimulating of the year.

Part lawyer, part philosopher, Mr. Betti is inquiring into the truth of a kind of impersonal murder. An Italian egotist, bored and irritated by an admiring wife, has contrived to get her murdered at second-hand by some troops invading the area. Technically, he appears to be innocent. But everybody who knows the case regards him as a murderer, and his conscience also condemns him. With this as a premise, Mr. Betti runs on into a number of speculations about the confusions in understanding between people who know each other intimately, about the vanity and bravado of human nature and about the omniscience and impartiality of God.

* * *

Mr. Shumlin's direction is as detached as Mr. Betti's point of view, and it is a good deal more laconical. As stagecraft, it is a work of real distinction. Mr. Drake who hankers after profounder art than the musical stage gives him, plays the part of the egotist admirably. It is a study of character in process of growth, from disdain to desperation and passion.

In fact, the acting is excellent all the way through. Philip Coolidge's impatient civil clerk, Percy Waram's mystical attendant and prophet, Anne Burr's cold-minded accuser and conspirator, E. G. Marshall's fussy, disingenuous lawyer, Constance Clausen's malicious neighbor and Margaret Draper's loyal, loving, forgiving wife—these are all crisp and discerning characterizations.

If the acting is engrossing, it follows that there must be something of value in the script. There is. There is a recognition of mysteries in life that introduce unreal tensions between people who ought to get on together amicably. There is a relentless probing of human understanding. If a poet were working on this material, he might create something moving and exalting about the hearts of men and women. Mr. Betti, a lawyer, has turned it into a cosmic quibble. His thoughts fly up; his words remain below.

"THE GAMBLER"

Play by Ugo Betti, adapted by Alfred Drake and Edward Eager; staged by Herman Shumlin; settings by Jo Mielziner; costumes by Robert Mackintosh; presented by Thomas Hammond and Wayne Harris at the Lyceum Theatre, October 13, 1952. The cast:

David Petri.....Alfred Drake
A Station Master..Percy Waram
Ernest Bruni....E. G. Marshall
Commissioner Costa.....
Philip Coolidge
Alma Greich.....Anne Burr
Paula Mori...Constance Clausen
Eva Greich Petri.....
Margaret Draper

New York Post

October 14, 1952

By Richard Watts Jr.

A Study in Crime and Punishment

It is not being strictly accurate, but it may not be too extravagant, to say that "The Gambler" is a sort of amalgamation of Dostoevsky and Pirandello. The play from the Italian of Ugo Betti, which opened at the Lyceum Theater last night, is a kind of metaphysical variation of "Crime and Punishment," and it strives for a degree of sensitive and thoughtful contemplation not frequently to be found in the contemporary drama. It is impossible not to have respect for its intentions, even though its achievements must be seriously doubted.

Indeed, "The Gambler" is so earnest, high-minded and spiritually striving in what it has to say, and its motives are so superior to those of the average play, that it seems all the more a shame to be forced to add that it comes out in performance as labored, pretentious and, in the end ineffective. It begins quite hopefully, with an ominous air of mystery, brooding over it interestingly, but, unfortunately, it is not long before its mystic search for guilt and forgiveness starts to interfere with its primitive theatrical effectiveness.

Question of Guilt

Its author, an Italian jurist, who has acquired an important post-war position in the reviving drama of his native land, is telling, in his own metaphysical terms, of a young man whose wife had been executed by the military in the final days of the late war. His sister-in-law blames him for the death, but David Petri is able to prove that he is not legally guilty of the crime. But he knows in his heart that he wanted his wife to die and that, in a devious way, he really had brought about her execution, and he comes to feel that he must suffer for it.

In the course of his narrative there are several points that the playwright apparently wants to make. He is concerned with man's insistence on being his own judge and executioner, but he is also preoccupied with such matters as the conflict between human and divine justice, the fine line between hate and love, the quest of the unbeliever for a faith of his own, and the place of forgiveness and mercy in God's scheme. Whatever may be said against Betti as a dramatist, he is, after his fashion, a spiritual writer and thinker.

Mystic Sense

But, as much as one may respect the moral intensity and the emotional earnestness of the author of "The Gambler," it is impossible to escape the impression that his play gets hopelessly bogged down in its own mystic sense. It is trying to contemplate the most vital of moral issues but it has great difficulty in making its points with the proper dramatic power, and it ends by being both ineffectual and sentimental. For almost all of its first half, however, it does succeed in holding the interest.

The play has been given an attractive setting by Jo Mielziner, and there are some excellent performances. Alfred Drake, who is also its co-adapter, proves that he is a first-rate serious actor as the tortured Petri, while Percy Waram as an agent of the Deity, E. G. Marshall as an avenger, and Philip Coolidge as the weary representative of human justice are admirable. The women of the cast have greater trouble, but Anne Burr manages to be effective as the murdered wife's sister. "The Gambler" is admirably high-minded but not admirably skillful.

New York Herald Tribune

October 14, 1952

'The Gambler'

By WALTER F. KERR

"The Gambler," which slowly and gloomily took over the Lyceum Monday night, is the sort of play which is first of all explained in the Sunday supplements before it opens. It is additionally explained in performance by actors with impressively sonorous voices. And it will, I suspect, be ultimately, definitively explained in the letter-to-the-editors column of some literary weekly a few weeks hence.

At the moment, though, this Alfred Drake-Edward Eager adaptation from the Italian of Ugo Betti is approximately as fog-bound as its opening scene.

We pick up David Petri—played by co-author Drake—in a dimly lighted railway station clouded over by an impressive Jo Mielziner fog, backed up by the shrill whistles of departing but invisible trains and superintended by a knowing Station-Master full of sagely mysterious advice. Before three lines of dialogue have gone by, the philosophical old gentleman has pointed out that "we are at a crossroads," a remark which indicates that from now on every simple statement is going to have two or three levels of meaning. In short, we are in for it.

Thereafter our depressed and puzzled hero is swiftly whisked into the antechamber of an unidentified commissioner who makes discreet inquries about the death of Petri's wife. His wife's sister is brought in to accuse him of having engineered her murder. Petri arrogantly asserts his innocence, but takes to wringing his hands a little nervously.

It isn't long before the dead wife begins to turn up in odd places. At one point she pops out of a bedroom cupboard, combing her yellow hair. At another she is discovered sitting morosely beside her own grave. The rest of the time she simply drifts in against the skydrop, hovers wraith-like over the investigation, moans a bit, and slides away again.

In due time we discover that the increasingly agonized husband has indeed been responsible for this girl's demise, that he hated her cordially at the time and that he is now—in some way that was not clear to me—beginning to be disturbed by the thought that he will never see her again. Conscience, it seems, is asserting itself and Petri must find some means of absolution.

To expedite this, a throne which is perched high in the air and which has been lighting up at various intervals throughout the evening is presently occupied by the old Station-Master, now presumably God. A conversation of remarkable ambiguity follows, and the young man is sent off to affirm a new-found belief in life, love, devotion and the possibility of happiness.

The trouble with "The Gambler" is not that it is theatrically adventurous but that it is emotionally sterile. Behind the pretentious posturing, and the endless philosophizing, there is never any feeling of flesh and blood. The language is high-minded rhetoric drained of warmth ("An alembic capable of distilling from innocuous words a poisonous venom") and the characters are cryptic little puppets, cold as ice.

It is difficult to see what there may have been about Mr. Betti's play to intrigue the translators and to urge them on to this careful, respectful production. But it is not impossible to see why Mr. Drake wanted to play the leading role. Petri is one of those parts actors dream about; silent and sullen for long stretches, occasionally giving vent to monosyllabic snarls, and then finally breaking out into impassioned declamation—and real tears—at 10 o'clock.

In all fairness to Mr. Drake, it must be said that he manages a few scenes extremely well. He is utterly convincing when he is describing the mounting loathing he has felt for his wife. And the tension with which he unpacks a trunkful of her belongings is momentarily gripping. But the hollowness of the play defeats him all too soon, and his final moments are more energetic than touching.

Anne Burr plays the nagging sister-in-law with calm asperity. Philip Cooldige fusses and frets as a commissioner with a decidedly mortuary air about him, and Percy Waram settles for a decent sobriety in one of those symbolic roles which asks that he always sound as though he were off-mike. Of the supporting company, it is perhaps E. G. Marshall who comes closest to investing a cardboard figure with lifelike traces.

Toward the end of the evening Mr. Coolidge was heard to shout in irritation: "I have already devoted two days of my life to your problem!" And it did seem like that.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

October 14, 1952

'The Gambler,' a Verbose but Different Drama

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"The Gambler" belongs to a school of playwriting for which the American audience is singularly unprepared. It can be classified as philosophical melodrama.

The sheer quantity of its verbiage stuns you. Its ideas are sound enough, but they are worried into confusion, if not to death, by the quibbling insecurities of the characters. In terms of what we think of as good lively theater, this play should be condensed into terse epilogue of an exciting story which is only sketchily suggested here.

All Post Mortem.

In terms of a contest, "The Gambler" is all post mortem and no game.

Starkly (which is effective) and symbolically (which is often annoying and childish) the play explores the conscience of a man who has caused the death of his wife. The core of the author, Ugo Betti's idea here is that moral retribution will come in a man's spirit, even though he has disguised a crime so he cannot be convicted by social instruments of justice.

The Gambler has been overcome with boredom at the selfless idolatry and suffocating physical passion of his wife, so has planted the seeds which lead another woman to betray the wife to a retreating army of occupation.

This is all told in retrospect, and the play itself concerns the man's succumbing to a sense of guilt, his fruitless efforts to be judged a criminal, then his horror at the fate allotted him by a Supreme Being.

In a paraphrase from Pirandello, the Gambler sees that the only time in his life he was "wonderful" was in his oppressive wife's loving eyes. He is condemned never to meet her again.

At the end, in a startling switch, the Gambler wins a contest over the Supreme Being and seems destined to find the woman he loathed in life.

The Performance.

As long as Betti concerns himself with the question of conscience, it is clear how strikingly applicable his play is to a post war world of quasi-informers, blackmarketeers and downright traitors, so few of whom are clearly condemnable.

It seemed to me that the play was performed in a heavy and humorless fashion which rigidly excluded any individualistic color from the characters. Instead of people they become generalities, and as such have no identification to the onlooker, universal or otherwise.

Alfred Drake contends manfully with the central role, but he is inundated in a welter of words, as are most of his fellow players.

Jo Mielziner has achieved remarkable densities with his lighting, and gives the play a fluid, transitory progress with sliding platforms.

DAILY NEWS

October 14, 1952

'The Gambler' Stylized, Serious, Philosophical and a Bit Confusing

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Since the theatre hungers for a drama to jounce it out of the doldrums, I wish I could report that last night's new one at the Lyceum, "The Gambler," is original, stimulating, profound and provocative—for this is its intent. Play and performance however, have left me confused. While I admire some of the scenes and quite a bit of the acting, I am far from certain of what the Italian dramatist, Ugo Betti, was driving at or striving for when he wrote it—and have a further dirty suspicion that Betti or his adapters, Alfred Drake and Edward Eager, didn't know either.

Grimly Stylish.

"The Gambler" is a stylized piece about a man in Italy who is accused of having arranged for the death of his wife so cleverly that he has committed murder and yet is completely innocent. It is not, however, a melodrama, but a series of soul-relieving soliloquies by a number of people including the corpse herself. Once in a while these passages do catch fire dramatically, and one scene in particular is touchingly acted by E. G. Marshall; but taken all together they have little dramatic compulsion. Our own Thornton Wilder has written with a surer fancy—and with useful humor—about the lonely hungers of the human soul.

Drake's adaptation is deliberately modish, being couched in excessively formal language. The acting—with Drake as the accused man—also is quite grimly stylish. It is, under the direction of Herman Shumlin, a well-knit and careful performance—but one in which emotion is held with a tight rein.

Some Effective Acting.

As a result, "The Gambler" is an intellectual exercise rather than a piece for the living stage—and my own poor intellect has been stirred around a bit but not particularly stimulated. Drake killed his wife because he thought he hated her, and after considerable debate on the part of all parties reaches the unhappy discovery that what he thought was hate was love. A belated discovery, now that his little Eva is no more than a beautiful ghost in a wedding dress and an old coat.

All of the performances are good. Drake's role is a long and harrowing one and he plays it effectively. Marshall is perhaps best as a lawyer defending the accused man and confessing, in one warmly human scene, that he, too, loved the murdered Eva. Percy Waram has authority in the alternate roles of a station master and God, and Philip Coolidge evokes welcome humor from the part of a petty investigating official. Anne Burr is properly cold and cynical as a sister of the murdered woman, and Margaret Draper is nicely pathetic and pretty as the ghostly remains of the victim.

The settings, by Jo Mielziner, are efficient, economical and unobtrusive.